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FBI Investigated Einstein as Spy For Five Years

The FBI has been caught occasionally in the rear-view mirror. Here is another look backward, which I hope will help ensure a better road ahead.

Albert Einstein, the exiled German physicist whose theories led to development of the atomic bomb, was under investigation for five years on charges that his Berlin office from 1929 to 1931 was a cable drop for a Soviet espionage ring operating out of the Far East.

According to FBI and Army intelligence documents, Einstein was unaware of the alleged spying.

The data gathered by U.S. intelligence, even the allegations, remained classified "secret" after the Nobel Prize-winning physicist's death in 1955, because they involved an "usually reliable" source in Berlin who gave explicit details to the Army's intelligence people in 1950. The source had to be protected.

Hundreds of pages of documents lay out the story. They were declassified between 1981 and 1983 in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by my associate Dale Van Atta. Here's the story:

- March 13, 1950: An Army G-2 memo shared with the FBI explained that Soviet spies in Shanghai and Canton would send coded messages to countries "such as Egypt or France." Then these surreptitious messages would be forwarded to cable addresses in Berlin. Among the addresses, the Army's informant said, were a watchmaker's shop, a box factory—and Einstein's office. One of his secretaries would give the reports to a courier, who would send them to Moscow, the tipster said.

The G-2 report acknowledged that "since these telegrams from the Soviet spies were in code, Einstein didn't know their contents." But it added: "However, it is reasonable to believe that Einstein did know that his office was being used by the Soviets as a telegram cover address."

- Oct. 23, 1950: A follow-up G-2 report postulated that the alleged Soviet espionage contact was Helen Dukas, then Einstein's secretary-housekeeper in Princeton, N.J.

- May, 1951: The FBI began combing through Einstein's writings.

- Nov. 28, 1952: The Army completed its probe in Europe and forwarded the results to Washington.

- Oct. 14, 1953: FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover asked the Army to "complete its investigation at the earliest possible time and forward the results to this bureau." The Army dispatched a courier from Germany with a letter stating that the

investigation had been completed 11 months before and a copy already had been sent to the FBI.

- June 24, 1954: The Army reported to Hoover, who evidently had asked G-2 to reopen the case, that its agents were trying to interview a doctor who might have information.

- Oct. 23, 1954: The Army reported that the doctor had been interviewed with no useful results.

- Nov. 9, 1954: The FBI concluded that there were no "outstanding leads . . . and the most logical remaining lead . . . is to interview Helen Dukas."

- Feb. 23, 1955: Two FBI agents interviewed Dukas at Einstein's home. "She did not appear to be evasive in any manner," the G-men reported, "but spoke quite freely At no time did she give any hint or indication that she was aware the investigation concerned her in any way."

The Army informant's story fell apart. The FBI concluded, after five years of digging, that "additional investigation is not warranted in view of the long lapse of time since Einstein's office was allegedly used by the Soviets, the lack of corroborating information and the fact that personnel involved are scattered in many countries and in many cases are deceased."

- April 18, 1955: Einstein died.

- July 27, 1955: A top FBI official recommended the case be closed.